

Washington State
Department of Transportation

I-5 Express Toll Lanes Study Focus Group Report

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Key Findings

- “Congestion” is the word often used by participants to describe what it is like to travel on I-5.
- Participants were hesitant to accept the idea of express toll lanes. They were uncertain that express toll lanes would improve traffic congestion and they did not want to pay more money to use highways.
- Watching the WSDOT video did not really change participants’ feelings towards express toll lanes, but some of the participants (more in group 1) might try the lanes in order to get some place in a hurry when there is heavy congestion.
- Participants did not support the idea of changing the carpool requirement to 3+ passengers.
- Overall participants had a concern that express toll lanes would reduce carpooling in the region because the incentive to carpool would no longer apply if you can just pay to use the lane. Also if requirement changes to 3+ for carpools it will be too difficult to achieve and so many people will stop carpooling.
- With an overall hesitation to accept the idea of express toll lanes no messages, descriptions, or reasons to use them were overly compelling or appealing to participants. However, messages focusing on the benefits of reliability, reducing congesting, and going faster were more compelling than others.
- Lastly, participants would likely give these lanes a try if they were in situations that warranted their use such as picking up children on time, getting to the airport on time, or getting out of town more easily for the weekend.

Introduction

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), as part of the Acceptance and Awareness of Pricing value pricing project, sought to understand people's thoughts, feelings, and overall support of express toll lanes. In addition, WSDOT wanted to gain a better understanding of people's travel experience on I-5, their possible future use of these lanes, support for the possible change of the HOV occupancy definition to 3+ (instead of the current 2+), and finally how to best communicate the concept of express toll lanes.

Two focus groups were conducted in English. Each group discussion lasted two hours. One group consisted of eight participants, while the other consisted of five participants. The participants were screened on how frequently in the previous week they drove on I-5, as well as on a variety of demographic variables in order to obtain a good mix of participants (see appendix A for participant profiles). The two groups were held in Seattle.

A moderator guide was used to structure the discussions (see Appendix B).

Findings

Travel Experience on I-5

As is usually the case regarding traffic in the Puget Sound region “congestion” is the word most used by participants to describe what it is like to travel on I-5. Heavy traffic congestion is often a problem for those who drive this route. Participants also felt traveling on I-5 was inconsistent in that the reversible express lanes often seem to be going in the wrong direction, sometimes there are a lot of people using the carpool lanes whereas other times there are hardly any and events seem to have a huge impact on traffic congestion. Traveling on I-5 can also be stressful if you have to travel during peak times and need to get somewhere on time. Other concerns were that changing lanes was difficult and that sometimes the signage is not clear.

When asked if they avoid certain traffic situations on I-5, participants indicated they avoid traffic congestion by taking other major routes such as I-405 and back roads such as Airport Way. They also may change the time of day they travel, or take a friend or family member so they can use the HOV lane. For the most part, none of these participants carpooled regularly.

Familiarity with *Good to Go!*

Overall, participants were not very familiar with *Good to Go!* accounts. Participants in group 1 were more familiar with *Good to Go!* than the participants in group 2. Some participants had used or seen the SR167 HOT lanes, and some participants had also used the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. However, many participants were somewhat familiar with the concept of electronic tolling. Participants did have concerns with how reliable the transponders were, and how the system would know if you were a carpool or not.

Attitudes Towards Express Toll Lanes

The facilitator read the following description of express toll lanes to the groups:

Express toll lanes are free for carpools and buses, and are also open to vehicles that do not qualify as carpools and who choose to pay for a faster, more reliable trip when they need it most. These are separate from the existing general purpose traffic lanes and would replace the existing HOV lanes. Toll rates adjust with the level of congestion to ensure that traffic in the express toll lanes is free flowing (at least 45 miles per hour 90% of the time) even when the regular lanes are congested. Current technology allows tolls to be collected electronically as vehicles enter the express toll lanes. There would be no toll booths. Toll rates for specific destinations would be shown before you enter the lanes. With express toll lanes you always have the choice whether to enter or stay in the untolled general purpose lanes.

“Could be a good start at solving the congestion situation.” –Group 1

“I don’t like this kind of active traffic management...it is a waste of money.” –Group 2

“On the East Coast traffic is better...they have tolls but the traffic flow is more consistent.” –Group 2

“These defeat the idea of carpooling...this would be helpful for middle management who can pay for it.” –Group 2

“This might be a good thing...if it works.” –Group 1

“Why would I carpool when I can just pay to get in the fast lane?” –Group 1

Participants were then asked to individually write down what they “thought,” “felt,” and “would tell someone” about express toll lanes. Even though there was some support for express toll lanes (more in group 1) the overall feeling about these lanes was hesitant and ambivalent. Some of the participants in group 2 really did not like the idea of express toll lanes and felt they were a short sighted solution to traffic congestion.

Initially, most of the participants in group 1 were more supportive of express toll lanes than those in the group 2. Although group 1 was more supportive than group 2, they were also ambivalent about express toll lanes because they didn’t like the idea of paying to use a lane that they paid for through the gas tax. Some participants in both groups did think that paying a toll might be worth the cost to get to their destination faster when traffic is congested.

The participants in group 2 who were skeptical of the idea of express toll lanes felt it was just another way for the government to make revenue during a budget shortfall. These participants also did not believe the express toll lanes would improve traffic congestion and some worried the express toll lanes would make traffic in the general purpose lanes worse. This group also felt that the introduction of express toll lanes defeated the main purpose of HOV lanes, which is to encourage carpooling. Lastly, both groups

expressed a concern that the new lanes would be inequitable. There was worry that the lanes would only be used by those with the income to pay for their use.

"I would spend the money when I want to get out of town on a Friday night." –Group 1

Opinions for both groups did not really change after watching the video explaining express toll lanes. In fact, group 1 participants become more concerned that the incentive to carpool with be lessened by these new lanes. Although they still felt they would use the new lanes if they needed to get somewhere faster, and they would likely open a *Good to Go!* accounts.

"If I wanted to get there faster, I would probably pay for it." –Group 2

Participants in the group 2 were "still not sold" after the video, however a few participants agreed they would consider using these new lanes if they needed to get somewhere faster.

HOV Lane Efficiency & the 2+ vs. 3+ Carpool Rule

The facilitator read the following statement about HOV lanes:

The HOV lanes were built to make transit fast and reliable, and to give an incentive to form carpools, so that more people could be moved without increasing the number of cars on the highway. The federal standard for HOV lanes is to operate at 45 mph during most rush hours. While HOV lanes are underutilized in some places and times, they have become congested during rush hours. For several years, our HOV lanes haven't met that federal standard, which makes transit more expensive and less effective. Changing to a 3+ carpool definition (where you would need at least three people in the vehicle to qualify as a carpool) would leave the HOV lane seeming empty, while causing severe congestion in other lanes. But changing to 3+ and letting others buy in would allow the lanes to be more fully utilized and reliably fast for the foreseeable future, while providing funding for other improvements.

Participants were asked how HOV lanes were currently working and if they were successful at reducing congestion. Overall, participants felt that the current HOV lanes on I-5 can be just as congested as the general purpose lanes, and that often there is no benefit (speed wise) in using them. Participants also felt the current HOV lanes were inconsistent in that sometimes they are congested,

"I will begrudgingly agree to the 3+ carpool." –Group 1

"This would keep people from carpooling at all." –Group 1

"This would make people angry you are taking something away." –Group 2

"This is taking a step backwards to the idea of carpooling. " –Group 2

"You can get home fast for the price of drip coffee." –Group 1

"Safely reduces congestion to get you there on time." –Group 1

"What about saying you will get home faster and avoid traffic congestion." –Group 2

while at other times it seems no one is using them. Participants also felt that better transit service in the region might help more than creating express toll lanes. Overall, participants were not convinced that having express toll lanes would improve HOV performance and many were not impressed by the 45 mph speed guarantee.

As a solution to deal with over-crowded HOV lanes and to improve the efficiency of express toll lanes, the groups were presented with the idea to change the current HOV designation from 2+ person to 3+ person carpools (vehicles with three or more people would not need to pay to use the express toll lanes). Participants were not overly enthusiastic about this change. Their main concerns included:

- belief that it would be too hard to get a 3+ carpool, as it is hard enough to have two people
- belief that this is punishing the current 2+ carpoolers, and would cause many people to abandon carpooling altogether
- belief that even though this could possibly improve speed and efficiency in the express toll lanes, it would still feel like the ability to carpool is being taken away from them

Overall, both groups were opposed to increasing the carpool designation and there was not strong agreement within the groups that changing the designation would improve traffic speeds in the HOV lanes.

Communication about Express Toll Lanes

Participants were provided a list of 12 messages that could be used to convey and communicate the idea of express toll lanes to the general public (included in **Appendix C**). They were asked to pick the most and least compelling messages for them to use express toll lanes.

While no participants seemed to be especially compelled by any of these messages, most indicated a preference for the message "this approach will deliver the promise of HOV lanes to make transit fast and reliable." In addition, group 1 participants found the message "these lanes reduce congestion and increase speeds for everyone," to also be compelling. Overall, participants preferred messages that focused on the benefits of reliability, reducing congesting, and going faster. A few people offered their own messages (see side bar).

Messages that the participants found least compelling included: “this is a fair way to pay for our highway system,” and “express toll lanes have become very popular in other cities once they try them out.” Participants stated that the word “fair” to describe a road they feel they already paid for just makes them mad. They also thought that the use of the word “pay” just reminds them they are paying again for a road they have already paid for. Participants also thought that Seattle is unique and who knows what Seattle’s experience with express toll lanes will be like compared to other cities.

Participants were also asked to indicate which descriptions of the express toll lane dynamic pricing (see **Appendix D**) were the most and least appealing. Again none of the descriptions presented seemed to be overly appealing to participants, but for both groups most indicated a preference for “the price of express toll lane changes with customer demand.” They liked this description because it was short, and explained clearly how the price changes with demand and use. This description made sense to them. However, participants in group 1 also preferred the description “express toll lanes provide reliable speeds of 45 mph” because *if* it is a true statement then everyone benefits.

Participants in group 2 preferred “express toll lanes adjusts price to manage traffic based on demand, just like the way supply and demand is balanced throughout the economy” because the reference to supply and demand made sense to them and describes how price varies with demand for space in the express toll lanes. Interestingly though, participants in group 1 really did not like this description because it was too wordy and felt the comparison to the current economy seemed negative.

Neither group found the description “express toll lane pricing changes minute-to-minute to maintain average traffic flow of 45 mph” to be appealing. They felt the minute to minute description made the price sound like it would be changing all the time and that would be confusing. More importantly, most did not like the “45 mph” description because participants ideally want to travel faster than this and did not feel this would be an acceptable benefit of the express toll lanes.

“I want to go much faster than 45 mph.” Group 1

When considering how to describe traffic flow on express toll lanes, participants found “more consistent traffic flow” and “faster average speeds” to be more appealing. They liked the description of ‘faster’ speeds rather than using the descriptor of ‘reliable’ speeds.

Lastly, participants were asked to decide what would be the most compelling reason to pay extra if they knew traffic was congested. Group 1 chose “I am willing to pay up to \$4 to pick up my children on time.” and “I am willing to pay \$4 to be on time for work.” Group 2 chose “I am willing to pay up to \$4 to avoid traffic congestion.”

Conclusions

Overall participants were hesitant to accept the idea of express toll lanes for I-5. Participants in group 1 were more willing to try them in situations where they needed to get somewhere on time, but overall they were still ambivalent about the concept. Participants were unsure express toll lanes would actually improve traffic congestion, and having them pay for a road they feel they have already paid for, increased their hesitation to accept the idea. Participants in both groups also expressed a great concern that introducing express toll lanes would reduce carpooling because now people can just pay to use them.

Changing the carpool limits to 3+ as a way to solve the problem of over-crowded carpool lanes was not accepted. Participants felt it was too hard to achieve a three or more person carpool, and that changing the rules only punished those who are currently trying to carpool. This change also increased their concern that carpooling in the region would decrease.

Lastly, because of their hesitation to accept the idea of express toll lanes no messages, descriptions, or reasons to use them were overly compelling or appealing. However, messages focusing on the benefits of reliability, reducing congestion, and going faster were more compelling than others. Also descriptions emphasizing that price changes with demand were more appealing. Lastly, participants would likely give these lanes a try if they were in situations that warranted their use such as picking up children on time, getting to the airport on time, or getting out of town more easily for the weekend.

Appendix A: Participant Profiles

Group 1 – Wednesday, September 15 at PRR from 6:30-8:30 pm

	1. In the last 7 days, how many days did you travel in your personal vehicle on I-5 either 10 miles north or south of Seattle?	2. Did you use the HOV lanes on I-5? (recruit a mix in each group)	3. Did you use the reversible express lanes on I-5? (recruit a mix in each group)	4. Which of the following broad ranges includes your age? (Recruit a mix)	5. Which of the following best describes your ethnic/racial background?	6. Which of the following income categories applies to your household's total annual income (before taxes) for 2009?	Q7. Gender
1	4	No	No	45-54	White	55-75	M
2	2	No	No	55-64	White	30k-55k	F
3	5	No	No	45-54	Black	55-75	M
4	5	Yes	Yes	55-64	White	90-125	M
5	7	Yes	No	55-64	White	55-75	F
6	2	Yes	No	35-44	White	75-90	M
7	5	Yes	Yes	45-54	White	55-75	M
8	1	Yes	Yes	55-64	White	90-125	F

Group 2 – Thursday, September 16 at PRR from 6:30-8:30 pm

	1. In the last 7 days, how many days did you travel in your personal vehicle on I-5 either 10 miles north or south of Seattle?	2. Did you use the HOV lanes on I-5? (recruit a mix in each group)	3. Did you use the reversible express lanes on I-5? (recruit a mix in each group)	4. Which of the following broad ranges includes your age? (Recruit a mix)	5. Which of the following best describes your ethnic/racial background?	6. Which of the following income categories applies to your household's total annual income (before taxes) for 2009?	Q7. Gender
1	5	Yes	No	55-64	White	150+	M
2	5	Yes	Yes	45-54	White	30-55	F
3	4	Yes	Yes	45-54	Native American	30+55	F
4	7	No	No	35-44	White	150+	M
5	7	Yes	Yes	35-44	White/Hispanic	90-125	M

Appendix B:

Moderator Guide

I-5 Express Toll Lanes Study Focus Group Moderator Guide

I. Introduction (7 minutes)

- Moderator introduces herself/himself.
- [Explain:] A focus group is a group discussion where we can learn more in-depth about peoples' ideas and opinions (compared to telephone or written surveys).
- My job is to facilitate the discussion and make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak **and to make sure that no one dominates the conversation.**
- Mention observers in separate room.
- Housekeeping – Toilets and refreshments.
- Mention ground rules:
 - There is no right or wrong answer; we're interested in your honest and candid opinions and ideas.
 - Our discussion is totally confidential. We will not use your contact information in any report.
 - Our discussion today is being recorded. These recordings allow us to write a more complete report, and to make sure we accurately reflect your opinions. However, please only speak one at a time, so that the recorder can pick up all your comments.
 - It is important to tell YOUR thoughts, not what you think others will think, or what you think others want to hear.
 - Please turn off cell phones
 - Your stipend will be provided as you leave.
 - Relax and enjoy

- We're going to spend our time today talking about some potential new travel options for the I-5 corridor. Any questions about the purpose of our focus group or the ground rules before we begin?

I'd like you each to introduce yourselves. Please tell us:

- Your first name
- Where do you live
- In the last 7 days how many days did you drive on I-5?
 - Did you travel during the weekdays, weekend days or both?
 - Did you use the reversible express lanes?
 - Did you use the HOV lanes?
 - Was this a typical week?

II. Travel Experience on I-5 and Experience with Toll Roads (15 minutes)

1. Where do you usually access I-5? And where do you usually exit?
2. Do you typically carpool or vanpool when using I-5? If yes, how many people are typically in your vehicle?
3. Provide participants with Mind Map form and ask them to individually write down what comes to mind when they think about traveling on I-5. Then open up to discussion and write common themes on flip-chart. [Listen for and probe on what words are used to describe their travel experience, particularly in regard to congestion.]
4. Have you heard of *Good To Go!*[™]? What is it? Does anyone here have a *Good To Go!*[™] account? How does that work? (Probe on and make sure participants understand electronic tolling.)
5. Have you crossed the new Tacoma Narrows Bridge? Have you ever used or seen the SR 167 HOT lanes? How do the HOT lanes work? Do you have any other experience with toll roads in other parts of the country?

III. Attitudes toward Express Toll Lanes (35 minutes)

Explain express toll lanes as - Express toll lanes are free for carpools and buses, and are also open to vehicles that do not qualify as carpools and who choose to pay a toll for a faster, more reliable trip when they need it most. These are separate from existing general purpose traffic lanes

and would replace existing HOV lanes. Toll rates adjust with the level of congestion to ensure that traffic in the express toll lane is free flowing (at least 45 miles per hour 90% of the time) even when the regular lanes are congested. Current technology allows tolls to be collected electronically as vehicles enter the express toll lanes. There would be no toll booths. Toll rates for specific destinations would be shown before you enter the lanes. With express toll lanes you always have the choice whether to enter or to stay in the untolled general purpose lanes.

6. Provide participants with Word Bubbles form and ask them to individually write down what they **think**, what they **feel**, and what they would **say** to someone else about **the introduction of EXPRESS TOLL LANES on I-5**. Then open up to discussion and write common themes on flip-chart. [Listen for and probe on reasons for their support or lack of support for ETLs. Listen for concerns about “lack of choice”.]

Show EXPRESS TOLL LANE video to illustrate the concept. Clarify any questions they have about EXPRESS TOLL LANES so that all have a clear and consistent understanding of the concept. Make sure they understand that they have a choice to either stay in the general purpose lanes or to use the express toll lanes.

7. Based on the video, do you understand what Express Toll Lanes are and how they are different from regular general purpose lanes? What is not clear? (Have diagram available to show how EXPRESS TOLL LANES are set up, buffer zones, barriers, how access works, etc.)
8. Now using the other side of your Word Bubbles form write down what you **now think, feel**, and what you would **say** to someone else about **the introduction of EXPRESS TOLL LANES on I-5**. Then open up to discussion and write common themes on flip-chart. [Listen for and probe on changes in support from before and after seeing the EXPRESS TOLL LANE video]
9. WSDOT is considering operating up to two express toll lanes in each direction on I-5 from Everett to Tacoma. These lanes would be in addition to existing general purpose traffic lanes. We assume that most people will not pay a toll to use the express toll lanes for every trip or even for most trips. The purpose is to offer an option if you need it.
 - How many of you can see yourselves paying a toll to use the express toll lanes at least one time per month?
 - Under what circumstances could you see yourself using the express tolled lane?
 - Under the circumstance you described, how much would you be willing to pay for a trip?

10. Would you support the introduction of express toll lanes on I-5?
Why or why not?

11. In the phone survey of I-5 users, 26% indicated “support” for express toll lanes on I-5, with 13% indicating *very strong* support. What do you think about that?

Ask client if they have any other questions they want asked before moving on.

IV. HOV Lanes – is there a problem? (20 minutes)

I want to switch the topic now to HOV lanes. The HOV lanes were built to make transit fast and reliable, and to give an incentive to form carpools, so that more people could be moved without increasing the number of cars on the highway. The federal standard for HOV lanes is to operate at 45 mph during most rush hours. While HOV lanes are underutilized in some places and times, they have become congested during rush hours. For several years our HOV lanes haven't met that federal standard, which makes transit more expensive and less effective. Changing to a 3+ carpool definition (where you would need at least three people in the vehicle to qualify as a carpool) would leave the HOV lane seeming empty, while causing severe congestion in other lanes. But changing to 3+ and letting others buy in would allow the lanes to be more fully utilized and reliably fast for the foreseeable future, while providing funding for other improvements.

12. Do you believe there is a problem with the HOV lanes being too crowded at some times and underutilized at other times?

13. How important is it to you that transit service be reliable on I-5?

14. Do the problems managing HOV lanes effectively change your feelings about the express toll lane concept?

15. Do you think HOV lanes that use a 2+ carpool definition cause more people to carpool? Is it more important to you to give a fast trip to 2-person carpools, or to give all highway users the option for a faster trip when it's most important?

Ask client if they have any other questions they want asked before moving on.

V. Communicating about Express Toll Lanes (40 minutes)

16. What would be the single biggest benefit to you if you used these lanes? Why?
17. What information would be helpful to you to help increase support for express toll lanes? Is there information missing from everything you've seen or been told thus far that you think would help people understand express toll lanes?
18. (Pass out list of messages) There are a number of messages on this page. I would like you to indicate the top three messages that would encourage you to use these lanes and also put an "X" by the one that you feel is the least compelling.
 - These lanes reduce congestion and increase speeds for everyone
 - This is a fair way for us all to pay for our highway systems
 - This approach will deliver the promise of HOV lanes to make transit fast and reliable
 - These lanes give me the choice of paying for something I would not otherwise be able to count on: a reliable trip
 - By varying the toll amount it is possible to control how many vehicles are in the lanes and that makes it possible to maintain higher speeds
 - These lanes are better for the environment because they reduce stop and go driving
 - Now more people will have access to those lanes instead of just carpools
 - I am willing to pay a fee to reduce my commute time
 - I am willing to pay a fee to be on time when I need to get to the airport or an appointment
 - Express toll lanes have become very popular in other cities once people try them out
 - Roads are safer because traffic is spread more evenly across the lanes
 - Other?

19. Which of the following descriptions is most appealing to you? Indicate your top 2 and X for your least favorite.

- Express toll lanes use dynamic pricing to maintain an average traffic flow above 45 mph.
- Express toll lane pricing changes minute-to-minute to maintain an average traffic flow of 45 mph
- Express toll lanes adjusts price to manage traffic based on demand, just like the way supply and demand is balanced throughout our economy
- Express toll lanes provide reliable speeds of 45 mph.
- The price of an express toll lane changes with customer demand.

20. Follow up to the above: Which phrases are most appealing?

- More consistent traffic flow
- More reliable speeds
- Faster average speeds

21. Which of the following statements would be most true for you if you know traffic is congested?

- I am willing to pay \$4 to pick my children up on time?
- I am willing to pay \$4 to be on time for work?
- I am willing to pay \$4 to be on time for a meeting?
- I am willing to pay \$4 to get home from work faster?
- I am willing to pay \$4 to avoid traffic congestion?

22. If you wanted to find information on express toll lanes, where would you be likely to look?

VI. Wrap Up (3 minutes)

23. Summarize key findings from the focus group.

24. Any other comments that you would like me to pass on to our client?

Ask client if they have any other questions they want asked.

Appendix C: Message Worksheet

Focus Group Date: _____

Time: _____

Message Worksheet

Please number the **TOP three** messages (with #1 being the most compelling, #2 being the second most compelling, and #3 being the third most compelling) that are most compelling for you to use express toll lanes. Also indicate with an "X" the option that is least compelling.

- ☐ 1. These lanes reduce congestion and increase speeds for everyone
- ☐ 2. This is a fair way for us all to pay for our highway systems
- ☐ 3. This approach will deliver the promise of HOV lanes to make transit fast and reliable
- ☐ 4. These lanes give me the choice of paying for something I would not otherwise be able to count on: a reliable trip
- ☐ 5. By varying the toll amount it is possible to control how many vehicles are in the lanes and that makes it possible to maintain higher speeds
- ☐ 6. These lanes are better for the environment because they reduce stop and go driving
- ☐ 7. Now more people will have access to those lanes instead of just carpools
- ☐ 8. I am willing to pay a fee to reduce my commute time
- ☐ 9. I am willing to pay a fee to be on time when I need to get to the airport or an appointment
- ☐ 10. Express toll lanes have become very popular in other cities once people try them out
- ☐ 11. Roads are safer because traffic is spread more evenly across the lanes
- ☐ 12. Other (please specify below)

Appendix D:

Description Worksheet

Please number the **TOP two** descriptions (with #1 being the most appealing and #2 being the second most appealing) that are most appealing. Also indicate with an “X” the option that is least appealing.

- ☐ 1. Express toll lanes use dynamic pricing to maintain an average traffic flow above 45 mph.
- ☐ 2. Express toll lane pricing changes minute-to-minute to maintain an average traffic flow of 45 mph.
- ☐ 3. Express toll lanes adjust price to manage traffic based on demand, just like the way supply and demand is balanced throughout our economy.
- ☐ 4. Express toll lanes provide reliable speeds of 45 mph.
- ☐ 5. The price of an express toll lane changes with customer demand.

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